The Life of the Nuns at West Malling Abbey: Social and Religious Dynamics from the Middle Medieval Period to the Reformation.

Figure 1. Gundulf Tower, Malling Abbey.

Dissertation submitted for the M.A. in Medieval Studies by

Janet Thorndycraft 231647

January 2026

Prifysgol Cymru
Y Drindod Dewi Sant
University of Wales
Trinity Saint David

Master's Degrees by Examination and Dissertation

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[1] All Photographs taken by David and Janet Thorndycraft, 2025

Acknowledgements

I would like to sincerely thank the wonderful, charming and serene ladies at St. Mary's Abbey, West Malling. I could not have completed this dissertation without Mother Abbess Anne Clarke, Sister Bartemaeus (Guest Sister), Sister Mary David (Archivist), and their fellow nuns, for their guidance and support. My visits have been a pleasure and their home is a place of tranquillity. I would like to thank Professor Jane Cartwright and Doctor Harriett Webster for their support throughout my studies at the university. Lastly, but by no means the least, my husband David, for his advice, encouragement, patience, and calling me down to lunch when I've lost all track of time. To you all, thank you and I hope I've done you proud.

Abstract

This thesis examines historical texts and archaeological evidence to explore the lives of the nuns of St. Mary's Abbey and their impact on the growth of the town of West Malling. These resources are few and widely scattered across archives. There are two short books exclusively about the abbey, one written by the nuns themselves and a second by Anne Oakley. For research on Benedictine nuns, while not specific to St. Mary's at West Malling, it is the works of Janet Burton, Sally Thompson, Eileen Power, Roberta Gilchrist and Maralyn Oliva which give a more general understanding of the life of a nun. This thesis aims to collate the existing works and original manuscripts to construct a chronological picture of 450 years of abbey life. Research has shown both the scarcity and ambiguities of sources while equally placing the abbey and town within the tumultuous natural and political events of the time. The thesis highlights a period when monastic life was at its height, before ending with the Dissolution. Nonetheless, life continued in West Malling whose town and abbey site still bear visible reminders of this inheritance. The enduring legacy of Gundulf, the Bishop of Rochester, would no doubt amaze him: but over a thousand years later the town, people and nuns of Malling remain a remarkable reminder of his vision to create a monastic place of worship for women.

Introduction

Shortly after the Romans left our shores, Bishop Justus established the second oldest Cathedral in Britain, Rochester Cathedral, in 604 AD. Justus was a missionary accompanying Augustine of Canterbury, sent to convert the pagans in the south of England to Christianity. With the permission of the King of Kent, Aethelberht, he dedicated a church to St. Andrew the Apostle. The manor of West Malling was given by King Edmund I to Burgric (or Burhic), who was then the Bishop of Rochester, in 946. The land was later lost to the church in the Danish Wars but was eventually restored to the diocese in 1076. Under Roman law the Cathedral was served by secular priests and had to provide training for priests and a choir school. Colin Platt writes of the monastic period prior to the Norman Conquest, 'The insularity of England, unbroken even by its own native monastic revival under Edgar (959-75), was entirely foreign to Normandy.'[2] After the invasion by William the Conqueror the Cathedral and its estates were granted to his brother Odo of Bayeux who misappropriated the Cathedral resources and reduced it to near-destitution with the building decaying.
The Archbishop of Canterbury brought Odo to task and appointed instead Gundulf, a French monk from Bec Abbey in Normandy, as the first Norman Bishop of Rochester in 1077. Bishop Gundulf of Rochester chose Malling as the site of his foundation for a community of Benedictine nuns, one of the first post-Conquest monasteries for women in England, and consolidated his fame for his care of the poor and his devotion to prayer. Gundulf had endowed the community with the manor of Malling and Archbishop Anselm had given the manor of East Malling. Royal grants gave the nuns the rights to weekly markets and annual fairs as well as wood-cutting and pasturage rights in nearby royal forests. Bequests and gifts also added to the community's income.

A talented architect he designed Rochester Cathedral and its tower, which bears his name. He replaced the secular chaplains with Benedictine monks and was given many royal grants of land. In 1090 Gundulf founded the convent of St. Mary's Abbey in West Malling, appointing Avicia as its first abbess in 1108. The abbey prospered and West Malling became a flourishing market town though its 450 years included major crises: a fire in 1190 that destroyed most of the abbey and town and the Black Death in 1349, which reduced the community of nuns and novices to eight. In 1538 Henry VIII's Dissolution forced the

[2] Colin Platt, *The Abbeys and Priories of Medieval England* (Bath Press, Avon, 1995), p. 2.

surrender of Malling Abbey to the Crown. With an annual income of £245 and extensive lands, it ranked among the top third of wealthiest women's communities. On 28 October 1538, two agents of the Crown seized the abbey seal and signed the deed of surrender but were unable to persuade a single nun to sign. With its outlying lands, Norman church, Early English cloister,15th-century guest house and two16th-century gatehouses, it was a rich prize for the king.

During the 350 years that followed, the abbey was owned by many families, most of them absentee owners. Although altered over time, it remained recognizable as an abbey, with the Gundulf Tower still standing and archaeological evidence of cloisters, refectory and church. Since 1916 an Anglican Benedictine community of nuns has lived on the site, invited by the trustees of Malling Abbey to continue its tradition of worship, prayer, study, work and hospitality. Today, the community continues to live under the Rule of St. Benedict, offering retreats and theological education at St Benedict's Centre. The coexistence of ancient remains and modern religious life embodies the abbey's enduring spirit of resilience and renewal.

Chapter 1: The Foundation of West Malling Abbey

Bishop Gundulf: background and motivation

The original seventh century church at Rochester was dedicated to Andrew the Apostle (patron Saint of monasteries) and consecrated by Augustine, was intended for clergy, monks and pilgrims to follow the *Rule of St Benedict*. The church was rebuilt over many centuries with stones, resources and designs from across Europe. Throughout, the constant was the celebration of the mass and teaching of the scripture, despite periodic rebellions and war. The church underwent destruction at the hands of Kentish kings, leaving it in poverty until better times with the granting of land by local overlords in the eighth century saw it recognized as a cathedral.

The manuscript *Textus Roffensis* (the Rochester Book) comprises of early English laws from the 600's and a collection of charters relating to Rochester Cathedral Priory. In it is a charter dated 942-946 in which King Edmund gave the manor of Malling to Burhic. Described as a small part of the king's land originally called Meallingas, it consisted of three ploughed lands and was gifted in perpetual inheritance to aid the revenues of the existing monastery dedicated to St. Andrew: 'with all things pertaining to it, field, woods, meadows, pastures and fowling, and this is with the counsel of my nobles and leaders whose names are found written below.'[3] Edmund clearly states where the swine pastures were, the number of pigs that the land could hold, and that these would provide rent for the diocese.

The land was later lost during Danish raids under Cnut and his successors, but after the Norman Conquest these raids diminished, 'through conquest, naturally led to a redistribution of lands; as the conqueror would of course remove those who were in power who were likely to oppose his authority,'[4] the estate was restored to the bishopric. William the Conqueror granted the cathedral and its estates to Odo of Bayeaux, his half-brother, and Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, who misappropriated its assets. After Odo's fall Gundulf was specially chosen by Lanfranc, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and appointed the first Norman bishop of Rochester. Lanfranc himself had been appointed by William I to assist him in restructuring

[3] Kent Archaeology Society <kentarchaeology.org.uk> [accessed 18 June 2025].

[4] Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Memories of Malling and its Valley* (E. Marlborough & Co., London, 1893), p. 12.

English monasticism. With the restored lands and property, Gundulf had income to begin reconstructing the derelict church buildings.

An extremely talented architect and engineer, Gundulf undertook the building of a new Cathedral in the Norman style starting with the tower which still bears his name and founded a community of Benedictine monks to serve there. In 1083 the Cathedral Priory was established, with Gundulf replacing the lay ministers with monks. Through his continuing favour with three consecutive kings, he was able to acquire lands and property, making him a great benefactor to Rochester.

Gundulf's character, as described in the twelfth century manuscript *Vita Gundulfi*, (translated into English by the nuns of West Malling Abbey and published as *Life of Gundulf* in 1968), offers further insight into his motivations for building an abbey for Benedictine nuns. The original *Vita* is generally accepted as a reliable source, written by one of his monks at Rochester who drew on personal experience of Gundulf's life and death, 'what I propose to write about him has been gathered either from what I myself saw or heard while living with him, or from others who knew him.'[5]

He is described as a man of deep faith, often moved to tears, with great integrity. For many decades he celebrated two masses a day. He was practical, an accomplished administrator, a peacemaker, loved, trusted and respected by all, from the king to the poor. With the backing of the king and Archbishop Lanfranc, Gundulf was judged to be the most fitting man to take on the office of Bishop. Unable to refuse their authority, 'His own plea of unworthiness was silenced, for the more he protested that he was unworthy, the more worthy was he acclaimed.'[6]

Lanfranc restored properties to Rochester on the condition that monks would again be installed, re-establishing monastic life. Within a few years a new church had been built, with many gifts given by the archbishop and townsfolk. These were so plentiful that there was enough for bishop and monks alike. Gundulf decreed that possessions should be owned separately, ensuring that future bishops would not be able to withhold what was set aside for the monks. This was especially important as their increasing numbers required more food and

[5] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf* (Printed at S. Mary's Abbey, West Malling, Kent, 1968), Prologue p. v.
[6] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf* p.24.

clothing: ‘so it was wisely decided that the monks should have the larger portion and the bishop the smaller.’[7]

With his close association to the king and Archbishop Lanfranc, Gundulf was empowered to consolidate Norman religious control in south-east England as part of the wider Norman monastic reform movement.[8] According to the *Vita*, Gundulf ‘set to work to build a convent for nuns on one of his manors called Malling – for as he was beloved of both sexes so he took pains to promote the spiritual welfare of each.’[9] This act linked his reputation for piety with practical provision for women’s religious life.

In the *Monasticum Anglicum,* William Dugdale records that the land originally given by King Edmund for the monastery of St. Andrew was later ‘converted to an Abby of Nuns here, dedicated to St. Mary to which King Henry the I, and King John, and Anselme Archbishop of Canterbury, were all Benefactors.’[10] Dugdale calculates its annual value at 218 l. 4 s. 2 d. ob., roughly £196,000, a very profitable royal gift.

In 1090 he founded the community of Benedictine nuns at Malling, a centre of prayer for almost five centuries before the Dissolution. While we cannot be certain of his exact motivation, it was likely both an extension of his deep faith and a political strategy: by embedding Norman Benedictine institutions in Kent, he strengthened diocesan authority across the county.

Janet Burton has written that ‘commentators have differed in their opinion as to how significant, as sole founders, bishops were.’[11] Sharon Elkins stresses the importance of Gundulf’s role: ‘taught the nuns, provided them with material necessities and performed spiritual services for them, he was said to care for their “interior and exterior” needs.’[12] While Gundulf is the only bishop known to have founded an abbey and ruled it without a female superior, Elkins suggests that ‘perhaps the other bishops chose to found priories instead of

[7] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf* p. 39.
[8] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994), pp.20-25.
[9] Ibid. p. 54.
[10] *Monasticon Anglicanum, Or The History of the Ancient Abbies, and other Monasteries, Hospitals, Cathedral and Collegiate Churches* Collated by Sir William Dugdale (R. Midgley, London, MDCXCIII), p. 37.
[11] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain, 1000-1300*, p. 94.
[12] Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth Century England* (The University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina, 1988), p. 15.

abbeys to emphasize that the female leader was only a prioress.'[13] The decision to found an abbey and exercise total authority was likely intended both to protect the nuns spiritually and to secure their material interests from weak patrons.

Context of post-conquest monastic reform

Prior to the Norman Conquest, the monasteries and convents were established centres of learning, religious life and social influence. They were led by abbots and prioresses living in reasonably insulated groups. Many had been beleaguered by Viking raids, which looted houses and left them in decline through loss of assets. After the Norman Conquest, many Anglo-Saxon monastic heads were replaced with Norman leaders, reflecting William's policy of tightening control over the English Church. William encouraged their growth, seeking greater uniformity and structure in line with Norman practice and administrative needs. Pope Alexander II approved William's invasion, even sending him a papal banner (depicted on the Bayeaux Tapestry). The papacy had long raised concerns about monastic life in England: the destruction caused by two centuries of Norse raids; the monasteries' dependence on gifts of land from lay lords, which compromised their independence; and doubts that the Benedictine *Rule* was being fully observed.

Lanfranc revised the liturgy to align it more closely with continental Europe. The abbot's role was clarified, a new monastic hierarchy introduced, and the canonisation of saints more tightly controlled. The lives of monks and nuns were strictly structured so that they could be seen as virtuous and respectable. The Norman reforms were highly successful: within 70 years the number of monks and nuns in England rose by around 4,000, while monasteries grew by nearly 200, and 15 new cathedrals were attached to monastic houses.[14] The reforms were not universally welcomed, but the growth in houses, the rise in new denominations, and the increase in numbers of monks and nuns suggest the Normans largely achieved their aims under papal authority. Religious houses post Conquest played a vital role in shaping the spiritual, social and scholastic landscape of England. They became hubs of piety, knowledge and discipline, where monks and nuns lived lives fully committed to religious observance.

[13] Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth Century England* (The University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina, 1988), p. 16.
[14] Bruce L. Venarde, *Women's monasticism and Medieval Society* (Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 1-9.

Role of royal patronage and land grants

Gundulf chose the location of Malling (overlooking the 'Ewell Spring' and a Roman burial site) to establish the church of St. Leonard, since demolished, and to erect the massive tower now known as St. Leonard's Tower. This was not built as a church tower, but as a statement of Norman authority and as a secure centre of administration for both secular and religious affairs. In the fourth year of William Rufus's reign, around 1090, Gundulf 'founded a monastery of nuns in this parish to the honour of the Virgin Mary, gave the manor and church of Malling to it, with other possessions, for its endowment.'[15] The king reinforced this gift with royal patronage, issuing a notification to his barons in Kent: 'That he has confirmed the work and the alms of Gundulf Bp. of Rochester, at his manor of Malling [co. Kent],'[16] witnessed by Ranulf, Bishop of Durham.

This donation was sanctioned by William Rufus's successors, Henry I, Stephen, Henry II, and Edward III, and by archbishops Anselm, Ralph, William and Thomas Becket, along with succeeding bishops of Rochester. All confirmed to the monastery and its nuns 'Mallinges Parva, with the market of the said village, the church of St. Leonard with its appurtenances, the church of St. Mary in Mallinges, and all other possessions belonging to the monastery.'[17] St Mary's Abbey was richly endowed with gifts and market rites, along with royal grants allowing the nuns pastural privileges and freedom to cut wood in nearby royal forests. Gundulf also built a church and domestic buildings, gathering a community of nuns from other convents. He 'took the greatest care that they should always have what would be profitable for their souls and should never lack what they needed for the body.'[18] Early endowments gave the abbey economic security and independence[19] while Gundulfs individual architectural design is recognizable.

For many years Gundulf chose to administer and guide to the nuns personally. His biographer describes his royal patronage:

> *He fought for God under three kings, esteemed and trusted by each of them. Under the first, William, he built the church of Rochester; in the second reign he increased its lands; under King Henry, son of the first and brother of the*

[15] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: Volume the Third* (James Bohn, London, 1846), p. 381.
[16] *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannom 1066-1154 Vol. 1* Ed. H. W. C. Davis (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1913), Calendar 485.
[17] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum,* p. 381.
[18] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf* p. 54.
[19] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders,* p. 210-212.

> *second king, he separated the monks' property from his own and confirmed it by royal charter. The first king willingly gave him leave to build, the second to augment, and the third to confirm, each one glad to co-operate in all the good the man of God was effecting.*[20]

The abbey became home to noble women under his counsel. Contemporary accounts suggest Gundulf may have doubted their ability to govern independently: 'he ruled over the nunnery himself as abbot, according to the French tradition, and appointed a French nun Avicia or Avice as his prioress.'[21]

During his final days, those at his bedside advised him to promote Avicia from prioress to abbess; otherwise on his death it would be left leaderless. Reluctantly, Gundulf presented her with a pastoral staff. Avicia promised 'obedience and canonical submission to the bishop and church of Rochester, and that she would not herself, nor through anyone, try to withdraw the convent from the authority of Rochester.'[22] This oath ensured the abbey remained under episcopal authority. Avicia had served a long time under Gundulf, 'and knew well his concerns and anxieties about the foundation and its future. The governance of the house now rested with her and her fellow nuns.'[23] With his engineering skills he earned the title of the first King's Engineer, later recognized as the "father of the Corps of Royal Engineers." Gundulf died on 8th March 1108 aged 85 and is still honoured as the patron of the Royal Engineers.

Early development and architectural layout

Glyn Coppack writes that the study of the abbey remains, 'using the skills of archaeology, the reading of their fabric, and the interpretation of their surviving documents, can now give a clear insight into their building, use, economy and communities.'[24] In 1798 Edward Hasted describes the remains of the abbey in his *Parishes: West Malling* as having a 'handsome tower of the church, the front of which is decorated with intersecting arches and zig-zag ornaments, is still remaining, as is an antient chapel or oratory, now made use of as a

[20] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf*, p. 58-59.
[21] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* (Parkers, Canterbury, 1990), p. 5.
[22] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf* (Printed at S. Mary's Abbey, West Malling, Kent, 1968), p. 66.
[23] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* p. 22.
[24] Glyn Coppack, *English Heritage: Abbeys and Priories* (The Bath Press, Bath, 1990), p. 12.

dwellinghouse.'[25] The plans of the abbey and its buildings drawn up by Aretas Akers 1850-1856 along with surviving prints provides enough evidence to suggest that St. Mary's design closely followed that of other Benedictine houses. The church formed one side of a quadrangle, while the other three sides incorporated the nuns' rooms, Chapter house, refectory, library, warming room and storage.

The excavation of the medieval nave in 1931 by F. C. Elliston-Erwood provided a more accurate understanding of the abbey's original layout. He noted that the nave, primarily based on the east end of the church, was similar in design to Rochester Cathedral. The typical shape for the period would have been apsidal, but both Malling and Rochester appear to have been rectangular. According to the journal of archaeologist Alan Ward, 'Erwood rejected the idea of a rectangular east end arguing that such a design was too early for either Rochester or West Malling.'[26] Because no remains of the east-end walls survive the original Norman design cannot be confirmed, a common problem for early medieval sites.

Tim Tatton-Brown, writing in 2001, reviewed Elliston-Erwood's dig and found that he had 'uncovered the foundations of the east wall (with four buttresses on its east side) of the thirteenth-century chancel, which more than doubles the size of the original easter arm.' [27] His excavations also revealed foundations of the north transept and, to its east, a thirteenth century choir aisle. Much has been destroyed, but modern utility works on the site continue to reveal archaeological evidence, though open to interpretation. The most significant surviving part of the Norman abbey is the tower. Built in stages, its earliest turrets date from c.1100; the second level, with waterleaf capitals, from around 1190; and the octagonal upper structures from the 14th–15th century.

Ward suggests there were four structural phases in the life of the abbey's life. Phase one is conjecture, based on current remains and an 1823 which 'shows a building forming a range extending to the west of the gatehouse. This building has a large door with a round-headed arch that suggests a date prior to c. 1200.'[28] It is likely that this wall aligned with the west

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[25] Edward Hasted, Parishes: West Malling, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4* (Canterbury, 1798), British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol4/pp518-533 [accessed 6 April 2025].
[26] KAS https://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/journal/121/st-marys-abbey-west-mailing [accessed 19 June 2025].
[27] Tim Tatton-Brown, The Buildings of West Malling Abbey in *Architectural History*, Vol. 44, Essays in Architectural History, 2001, p. 180.
[28] KAS https://www.kentarchaeology.org.uk/journal/121/st-marys-abbey-west-mailing [accessed 19 June 2025].

wall of the gatehouse, which still partly exists. Boundary walls would have enclosed the abbey; the gateway, still used today, probably formed the entrance to the precinct. The gatehouse 'contained the usual separate entry arches for carts and pedestrians.'[29] Visitors would have seen an impressive approach to the west front of the earliest church while the gatehouse contained separate entry arches for carts and pedestrians, with a chapel above for secular visitors and the convent priest.

The first eleventh century church would have been rudimentary with thick herringbone masonry walls; some still survives today. After the fire of 1190, which destroyed much of the abbey, rebuilding incorporated the remaining herringbone stonework up to four feet high. The new church was modelled without aisles. John Newman observes, 'Of this aisles church, only the s wall of the nave and the s transept stand above ground.'[30] These remains are now used by the nuns as their Chapter House.

The cloisters, probably thirteenth century, lie to the south-west of the church. Newman describes their arcading as 'of outstanding quality. Quatrefoil shafts two deep, arches of trefoil shape. Tri-lobed leaves interlacing on the capitols, in a row round each arch, and sunk in spandrel roundels.[31] Fielding, writing in the 19th century, considered them unique: 'The cloisters of Malling Abbey, now built into the modern dwelling house, are unique. The windows show that there were five bays consisting of three separate lights. There are none to be found like them elsewhere in England.'[32]

[29] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture The Archaeology of Religious Women* (Routledge, London, 1997), p. 73.

[30] John Newman, The Building of England*: West Kent and the Weald* (Penguin Books Ltd, Middlesex, 1976) p. 602.
[31] Ibid. p. 603.
[32] Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Memories of Malling and its Valley* (E. Marlborough & Co., London, 1893), p. 14-15.

Figure 2. The Abbey Cloisters, Malling Abbey.

Phase two saw the addition of a chapel dedicated to St Thomas of Canterbury (c.1320) to the left of the gates. Built of ragstone with a tiled roof, the Pilgrim Chapel was used as a place of worship, meeting house, carpenter's shop and orphanage.

Figure 3. Chapel of St Thomas of Canterbury, Malling Abbey.

Phase three involved further construction of the gatehouse, which Newman considers a late fifteenth century structure: 'The gatehouse presents a c.15 appearance outside, with the usual

two arches, a large two-centred one for carts, and a small four-centred one r. of it for foot passengers.[33]

By the fourteenth century, St Mary's Abbey faced economic strain, though recovery followed resulting in the complete remodelling of the nave in the early fifteenth century. Tatton-Brown suggests 'This was possibly because the nave was being less used by the common people of West Malling, after a chapel had been built to the north of the main gatehouse.'[34] A building that survived the Dissolution is the guesthouse, lying beyond the cloisters at the west range and across the Ewell stream, 'inside there survives intact most of the fifteenth century timber frame of the first-floor chambers and all of the crown-post roof.'[35] This remarkable building which would once have had timber-framing covering the cloister walk to the south, shows how prosperous the abbey was just before the Dissolution.

From the south gateway, there would have been access to extended precinct areas including the granary, barns, bakehouse, and the brewery. Excavations have revealed where the fishponds were sited, and the stream running through the abbey grounds likely supplied water for the kitchens, brewing, and the reredorter. Roberta Gilchrist observes that wealthy nunneries such as Malling, 'were planned and comprehensively rebuilt in a manner more closely approximating that of male houses, the status of the founder and inmates placed the nunnery outside accepted notions of the form and function of female houses.'[36]

[33] John Newman, The Building of England*: West Kent and the Weald*, p. 601.
[34] Tim Tatton-Brown, The Buildings of West Malling Abbey, p. 183.
[35] Ibid. p. 188.
[36] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture,* p. 126.

Chapter 2: The Rule of St Benedict and Daily Monastic Life at West Malling Abbey

Overview of Benedictine monasticism

The daily lives of the Benedictine nuns at West Malling were governed by the *Regula Sancti Benedicti*, the *Rule of St. Benedict*, a monastic code composed in the early sixth century that became the foundation of Western monasticism. Benedict of Nursia had written the *Rule* c. 535-550 for his own house at Monte Cassino, Italy, as a guide for communal living, providing a framework for governance and daily routine. Although other rules existed, St. Benedict's became the benchmark model for Western monasticism. Monastic houses relied on lay patronage, benefactors who granted land for building and sustenance, expecting in return prayers for their souls in the next life. This dependence on the secular world created a spiritual paradox: while seeking separation from lay life, monastics relied on it for survival. The heart of the *Rule* is the principle of *ora et labora*, that is prayer and work, designed to create a life of humility, obedience, stability, and community.[37] Benedict wrote initially for male monastics, but it was modified over time to accommodate the specific requisites of those living in female monastic houses.

Application of the Rule at West Malling

Malling Abbey was unique, as 'in England only eighteen nunneries enjoyed the greater status and independence of being an abbey ruled by an abbess with a prioress as her deputy,'[38] The *Rule* placed full authority for governance in the hands of the abbess, who was both spiritual leader and administrator, she was to be 'wise and mature in conduct, well versed in the divine law, discreet and temperate.'[39] These expectations were not only holy but functional as the leader had the duty of applying order, overseeing the compliance of the *Rule*, managing the abbey estates, the maintenance of its buildings, and representing the community in the relations with the Church hierarchy and secular authorities. Curran and Burton write that 'Within the convent the head of the community was the supreme authority in all things

[37] David Knowles, *The Monastic Order in England* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1963), pp. 69-73.
[38] Mike Slater, *Medieval Nunneries* (Folly Publications, Malvern, 2015), p. 8.
[39] Mary Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in late Medieval England* in Women and Literature in Britain, 1150-1500, er. Carol M. Meale (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993), pp. 148-167.

spiritual and temporal as they pertained to the maintenance of her community.'[40] Gilchrist and Oliva wrote of the abbesses that, 'These religious women not only managed their busy households and complicated finances without male supervision or interference, they also decided upon and executed the activities which wed them to their local lay communities.'[41] While spiritual leadership was paramount, practical management occupied much of an abbess's time. She had to balance monastic ideals with practical realities, paying labourers, maintaining buildings, and defending the house's property rights.

The abbess had responsibility for stallholders at the weekly and yearly fairs who paid stall-rents to the abbey while the cottagers gave rent owed for services. This payment was often in kind, when a tenant set a fire in a new chimney for the first time the nuns were paid with a 'smoke hen'. The taxation of 1291 reveals temporalities of the abbey at £45 a year from Rochester diocese and along with income from Westwell, Cornard in Suffolk, Wimbush, Sible Hedingham in Essex and spiritualities from Wouldham and Wimbush, the abbey was yielding an annual income of £89. Despite Power's assertions that nuns were responsible for their own misfortunes due to bad management and incompetence, this is belied by the success of this taxation report revealing that at least some abbesses showed strong, capable managerial skills. The abbess was supported by a hierarchy of officials: the prioress (her deputy), the cellarer (in charge of provisions), the sacrist (responsible for liturgical objects and church linen), and the treasuress (handling income). These roles reflected the Benedictine balance between work and prayer. Benedictine nuns were members of a respected and highly structured religious order where the abbess exercised both spiritual and administrative authority over the community.[42]

At St. Mary's Abbey, West Malling, the *Rule* structured every aspect of the nuns' existence, from the canonical hours to work, mealtimes, silence, and rest. As in male monasteries, the nuns lived communally: they slept in shared dormitories, dined in a common refectory, and were forbidden both idle conversation and private possessions. As women, nuns could not be ordained as priests or officiate at Mass. Their devotional reading was more likely to be in

[40] Kimm Curran and Janet Burton, *Medieval Women Religious c. 800-c.1500* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2023), p. 163.

[41] Roberta Gilchrist and Maralyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia* (Centre of East Anglian Studies, Norwich, 1993), p. 17.

[42] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders*, pp.171-175.

English rather than Latin, and enclosure rules forbade them from leaving the confines of the abbey or performing duties in the wider community.

The *Rule* established a clear hierarchy within the abbey led by the abbess, chosen by the community of nuns as both a spiritual mother and administrative head. It was her role to lead by example, ensuring the faithful observance of the *Rule,* and correct faults with a kind manner: 'when punishing he must act sensibly and not be excessive, in case he should damage the pot while trying to scrub away the dirt.'[43] She also oversaw the house's finances with care. Potential nuns spent their first six months as novices before profession was recorded in the bishops' register. Once professed, they were clothed in the habit before the abbess and Bishop of Rochester. As full members of the community they were able to vote in the electing of a new leader in the Chapter and were expected to accept offices such as cellarer, precentress, treasuress, prioress, or sacrist when called upon.

Novices, whatever their background, had to meet certain criteria to be considered suitable for the house, 'to be legitimately born and be physically and mentally fit for the rigours of monastic life. They were expected to have attained a certain degree of education, or demonstrate the ability to learn how to read Latin prayers of the Divine Office.'[44] When the novitiate had completed a year of learning the communities routine and prayers, she would took vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience, which 'bound her for life to the religious community upon which she would rely for food, clothing, and spiritual nourishment for the rest of her life.'[45] A nun received a modest pittance, considered adequate rather than lavish. The *Rule* prescribed a mainly vegetarian diet of bread and pottage, with seasonal vegetables and fruits, and fish eaten on certain days, likely from the abbey's fishpond which was known to exist in the abbey grounds.

Routine, prayer, labour, education

St. Benedict split the schedule of monastic life into three tasks: divine service, manual labour, and study. This balanced rhythm kept both body and mind disciplined and provided variety to sustain spiritual focus. Platt observes that 'One of St Benedict's chief purposes in laying down a routine was to avoid that idleness (*otiositas*) which he saw as "the enemy of the soul".'[46] The nuns day began in the early hours with Matins and Lauds, continuing

[43] *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Translated by Carolinne White (Penguin Classics, UK, 2008), p. 93.
[44] Roberta Gilchrist and Maralyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia* p. 51.
[45] Ibid. p. 52.
[46] Colin Platt, *The Abbeys and Priories of Medieval England* p. 142.

throughout the day with Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, and lastly, Compline. Between these canonical hours, time was set aside for reading, study, embroidery, writing, tending to the gardens, and the management of the abbey's lands.

While the central spiritual life of the nun lay in the choir offices, the *Rule* included the importance on manual work as a means of discipline and protection against idleness. The nuns therefore oversaw farming, producing manuscripts, and the supervision and distribution of alms and hospitality. One of the most important and central spiritual roles for the nun was in offering intercessory prayers, 'prayers that ensured a soul's swift passage through the fiery torments of purgatory into the eternal bliss of the heaven beyond.'[47] Contrary to assumptions that nuns neither read, wrote, or owned books, wills and records suggest a strong reading culture within convents. The *Rule* itself warns that idleness is the enemy of the soul prescribing reading as essential: Chapter 48 states that 'during Lent they should all be given a book from the library which should be read from cover to cover.'[48]

While the Malling library may not have been as extensive as those of male monasteries, it would have included devotional books such as the Bible, Book of Hours, missals, and liturgical texts for daily services and prayer. In wealthier abbeys like Malling, there were also books on the lives of the saints and devotional treatises. Occasionally, books passed outside the convent walls, as in the case of Elizabeth Hull, who 'gave to the infant Margaret Neville at the latter's 1520 baptism.'[49] This gift was likely political, since the child's father, Sir Thomas Neville, patron of the church in Mereworth, maintained a lasting interest in Malling Abbey and later sought to purchase it at the Dissolution.

Relationship between spiritual and practical life

In practice, the observance of the *Rule* fluctuated extensively depending on the circumstances at that time, such as finances, sickness, or political pressures. Surviving visitation records and archaeological evidence suggest that the abbey at West Malling generally remained within the Benedictine model while adapting when necessary. The flexibility within the *Rule* allowed the abbey to survive during periods of crisis such as the Black Death by making practical adjustments. St. Benedict himself had written that each person's weaknesses should be taken

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[47] Roberta Gilchrist and Maralyn Oliva, *Religious Women in Medieval East Anglia* p. 58.
[48] *The Rule of St. Benedict* p. 72.

[49] Mary Erler, *Women, Reading, and Piety in late Medieval England* p.45.

into consideration: ‘If someone needs less, he should thank God and not be discontented, while someone who needs more should show humility because of his weakness and not become proud because he had been shown compassion.’[50]

The life of the abbey and its role within wider West Malling society meant that it was not entirely confined nor secluded. The Benedictine ideal positively encouraged hospitality, and the town’s weekly markets and annual fairs would naturally have drawn contact with laypeople. The nuns were likely engaged in teaching, especially to the girls placed in their care for education or spiritual development, and in offering basic medicinal care to those in need. The *Rule* offered the nuns a durable framework that balanced discipline, fellowship, prayer, and flexibility, enabling the community to flourish spiritually while taking part in the social and economic life of medieval Kent.

[50] *The Rule of St. Benedict* p. 56.

Chapter 3: The Abbesses and Female Leadership

Biographies of notable abbesses

The abbesses of St. Mary's Abbey, West Malling, played an essential role in guiding the community through spiritual, economic and social change. Each left distinctive traces in the historical record that reflect both her personal qualities and the wider forces shaping monastic life in medieval England.

Avicia, the first woman appointed abbess by Gundulf in 1108, had served as prioress under his direct supervision. According to the *Vita Gundulfi*, she promised obedience and canonical submission to the bishop and his successors, ensuring the abbey remained subject to episcopal control. Her tenure appears peaceful and prosperous: royal charters confirm that Avicia enjoyed exceptional protection, King Henry wrote to the bishop, sheriff and barons that, 'Avice Abbess of Malling hold all her possessions as freely as any other abbess holds them.'[51] He again re-iterated his support for Avice in 1123 by ordering the Archbishop of Canterbury to safeguard her lands. Avicia's tenure set the tone for centuries of stability and discipline at West Malling.

In 1299, the Archbishop of Canterbury conducted a visitation of the abbey, he expressed concerns about their behaviour and supervision, which included begging, bribery, breaking silence, disproportionate laughing, the wearing of costly clothes, overindulging in eating fish and meat, and interaction with men. The abbess was Agnes de Percy, who was personally accused of selling bread and wine to the public, and involved with a disagreement over the enclosure of public water land. The archbishop ordered the nuns to regularly attend Divine Service, that the head of the house be present in the cloisters, ensure the exclusion of seculars, and that 'two senior nuns be appointed treasurers of the abbey funds, forbade the sale of bread and ale, and directed that four nuns should be punished for incontinence.'[52]

The archbishop ordered that sick nuns were not to be given meat and fish in their diet. He had observed that after blood-letting a third of the nuns of the abbey were unwell, his opinion was that they were using sickness as an excuse to eat meat. He further instructed that the nuns should not retain leftover food from meals, that it should be given to the almoner and

[51] *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannom 1066-1154 Vol. 2* Ed. Charles Johnson and H. A. Cronne (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956), Calendar 1081.
[52] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* (Published by the Author, Anthony Cronk, West Malling, 1951), p. 11.

reserved for the poor. While confession had been a whispered private event, he instructed that they should be 'heard aloud and standing in the open where nuns met communally; no more favouritism for those who fought shy of confessing their sins before God.'[53] At this time bells hung in the tower, during his visit the archbishop demanded that the sacrist ceased employing men to ring the bells, instead she was to do it herself, assisted by her fellow nuns. The archbishop's ban on wearing expensive clothing indicates that the Malling nuns were purchasing their own clothes, creating diversity of quality and quantity amongst them.

Three further directives were given, that unless there was a license from the diocesan and majority vote from the Chapter then no-one was to be accepted into the abbey; no more nuns to be accepted until their numbers had dropped to an acceptable level; that all unprofessed nuns should be professed quickly. It is likely that the first instruction had been disregarded for some time, the second was common sense as the more nuns there were the higher the cost to feed and clothe them, while the last directive ensured that those responsible for teaching the novices carried out their duty promptly. The most severe lack of discipline within the abbey was that of incontinence as only chaste women could serve God. Isabel de Chimbeham was imprisoned in the abbey gaol until she showed contrition and reform, while a lesser punishment of seclusion from choir, refectory and Chapter was meted out to Margery de Valognes, Joan de Cantuaria and Reyne de Wilryington. The monastic life was one of commonality, where property and privacy did not exist, the archbishop saw a lack of discipline and weakness among the sisters, his strict directives were meant to inspire the nuns to follow the *Rule* more closely.

The early fourteenth century brought renewed scrutiny. The nuns of St. Mary's complained to the king concerning Abbess Elizabeth de Baddlesmere, 'that their monastery was ruined by the bad management of their abbess.'[54] The king instructed the Bishop of Rochester, Hamo de Hethe, to visit the abbey and request that she declare an account of her stewardship. She was accused of striking a nun, Joan de Pirton, and of financial mismanagement. Elizabeth submitted rolls for audit which were assessed by three men, Master Bartholomew, rector of Offham, acting on behalf of the abbess, Gervase de Cruse, acting on behalf of the convent, and a third person who acted on the behalf of the bishop. Their investigation was damming, recommending her suspension on the suspicion of dilapidation. When called to offer a true account of her leadership, excused herself citing ill health. In her absence she was found

[53] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* p. 32.
[54] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: Volume the Third* p. 381.

guilty of the mismanagement of the abbey and ousted. The administering of the abbey was placed in the hands of the prioress, the sacristan, the rector of Offham and Guy de Cosenton. Eileen Power wrote of this incident that 'too much importance must not be assigned to the charge, for she was a sister of Bartholomew de Baddlesmere, at the time a leader of the baronial party against Edward II.'[55] Powers' opinion was that the removal of Elizabeth 'was probably a political move,'[56] rather than one of bad management, that her removal was likely a move to gain favour with the king.

The bishop found that the prioress, the precentress and sacristan had carried out their offices correctly and their keys were returned to them. Along with Elizabeth the cellaress, Eleanor de Baddlesmere, was also removed from her position, she was likely to have been a relative of the abbess. In Dugdale's *Monasticon Anglicanum* Hamo de Hethe, 'heard the complaints against her; on which she resigned, and the bishop proceeded to an election, or rather nomination of a new abbess.'[57] The outcome was the election by the nuns of Agnes de Leybourne, whose family were the noble lords of Leybourne Castle. Elizabeth's successor was equally badly behaved, secretly leaving the abbey to visit friends in Leybourne and allowing them rooms at the abbey. She only held the position for three years dying in 1324, yet again the nuns asked for the bishop to visit to elect a successor.

The nuns unanimously chose the prioress Lora de Retlyng, 'though he did it much against his will, knowing her to be ignorant and unfit for the office. He moreover prevented the new abbess from giving a corrody to her maidservant.'[58] Before her investiture it reached Bishop Hamo that land rights had been transferred into private ownership, whether by selling, leasing or gifting, forbidden under monastic law. Corrodies were being sold against express orders using the abbey's common seal, the bishop ordered the removal of the seal of the convent, confiscated it, placed it in a linen bag under his own seal and forbade it to be used without his permission being gained. The seal of the abbey 'depicted the Virgin crowned under a Gothic canopy, with the Holy Jesus in her right hand and a sceptre in her left; in a niche a figure praying.'[59] The motto reads '*Sigillum commune Monasterii Beatae Mariae de West Malling*' or the common seal of the Monastery of the Blessed Mary of West Malling. Gilchrist writes

[55] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women Religious 800-1500* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1922), p. 149.
[56] Ibid. p. 149.
[57] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: Volume the Third* p. 381.
[58] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: Volume the Third* p. 381.
[59] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 11.

of this seal that 'Houses with the rank of abbey possessed seals with a high degree of ornamentation and complexity of theme represented.'[60]

A dispute arose between the abbess and the vicar, Robert de Beulton, in 1339, regarding tithes. It was instructed that the vicar should receive the lesser tithes along with the personal tithes in Holy rode Street and Tan Street (now known as Swan Street and Frog Lane) while the abbey should receive the greater tithes The vicar was required to fund all things necessary for the church, 'bread and wine for the sacraments, processional tapers, lights for the chancel, accustomed minister's rochets, surplices, unconsecrated napkins, vessels, basins, and green rushes to strew the church if necessary.'[61]

The bishop continued to have unease about the abbey. He wrote regarding information received of secular women other than abbey servants admitted to the enclosure, that abbess and nuns left the abbey to visit friends, something strictly forbidden, and men had been received during the night. Despite a strongly worded letter ordering them to desist it was two weeks before the frustrated bishop received a reply reaffirming their obedience, 'the bishop must surely have reflected that he had known she was incapable and too ignorant for the task from the first.'[62]

A year later in 1341 'the temporalities of the abbess of East and West Malling were valued at £45,'[63] Lora de Retlyng was the abbess with this substantial annual income amounting today to many thousands of pounds. Yet in 1349 when the abbey was led by Isabel de Pecham, the Bishop of Rochester, 'going on a visitation, found monasteries of Lesnes and Malling so decayed as hardly to appear restorable.'[64] Power cites from Wharton, *Anglia Sacra, 1,* 'he found them so ruined by longstanding mismanagement, that it is thought they never can recover so long as this world lasts, even to the day of judgement.'[65] Although Malling had suffered badly during the Black Death, Power asserts that, 'our knowledge of Lora de Retlyng, make it clear that bad management was to blame for its poverty.'[66]

Cicely Batesford was thought to be such a great abbess that on her death in 1440 the bishop of Rochester was petitioned to authorize a yearly requiem mass in her honour, in addition a

[60] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture* p. 143.

[61] Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Memories of Malling and its Valley* (E. Marlborough & Co., London, 1893), p. 36.
[62] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* p. 37.
[63] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: Volume the Third* p. 381.
[64] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum: Volume the Third* p. 381.
[65] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women Religious 800-1500* p. 149.
[66] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women Religious 800-1500* p. 149.

celebration was to be held with the distribution of three flagons of wine, one to the abbess and two for the nuns. Cicely had lived forty years in the abbey, Pope Boniface IX had instructed the abbess to assign a nun of Cicely's choice to be a companion, and a room within the precinct as an infirmity prevented her attending the canonical hours. Nevertheless, she was sufficiently improved to serve as abbess for several years. Her career demonstrates how capable leadership could reverse decades of decline and regain episcopal favour.

Elizabeth Rede is an abbess of note, a wealthy woman in her own right, she had inherited a considerable amount of plate. She did not hand this over to the abbey as she was required to but kept it with her as personal property. Her downfall in the main was caused by the abbey position of High Steward, it came with a house in Thorne and £40 a year. She had promised the position to her brother-in-law Thomas Willoughby, Thomas Cromwell wanted it for Sir Thomas Neville, his pupil, the king wanted it for Thomas Wyat, a friend of Anne Boleyn, while Sir Edward Wootton Boughton Malherbe declared that the abbess had promised the position to him. The inevitable outcome was the king's choice; Thomas Wyat was given the office. The following year Elizabeth resigned with a pension, a room in the abbey as was her right and kept her possessions and plate.

Governance, responsibilities, conflicts

The abbess answered to the bishop of Rochester but otherwise had near-complete control over the abbey's moral and practical welfare. The installation ceremony would be performed by the bishop where a crozier would be received as a symbol of her authority, 'she pledged her obedience to her ecclesiastical superiors and the sisters of the community in turn swore their obedience to her.'[67] At West Malling, the abbess presided over Chapter meetings, assigned daily tasks, and ensured the observance of silence, prayer and study. She also administered finances and oversaw estates and tenants.

The most important item that the abbess had responsibility for, and was a sign of her authority, was the convent seal. Curran and Burton cite that 'One of a superior's most important possessions, was the convent seal. An uncontrolled seal signalled trouble.'[68] The seal of the abbey 'depicted the Virgin crowned under a Gothic canopy, with the Holy Jesus in

[67] Kimm Curran and Janet Burton, *Medieval Women Religious c. 800-c.1500* (The Boydell Press, Woodbridge, 2023), p. 165.

[68] Kimm Curran and Janet Burton, *Medieval Women Religious* p. 178.

her right hand and a sceptre in her left; in a niche a figure praying.'[69] The motto reads '*Sigillum commune Monasterii Beatae Mariae de West Malling*' or the common seal of the Monastery of the Blessed Mary of West Malling.

Figure 4. The Abbey Seal, West Malling.

There were varying leadership qualities amongst the abbesses, episcopal visitation records across England reveal that internal conflict was not uncommon in female houses. In 1299 Archbishop Winchelsey conducted a visitation to correct abuses of privilege, complaining of costly clothing, excessive laughter, and contact with men. His injunctions required the abbess to supervise enclosure and assign treasurers to manage abbey funds. The14th century visitation by the bishop emphasized concerns for moral discipline and proper enclosure. The report revealed irregularities within the services and slack implementation of silence in the cloisters. The archbishop expressed his concerns around the life of the cloister, instructing that 'the abbess must spend more of her time there, overseeing all that was done, and assuring the proper deportment of those present.'[70]

These concerns were not unique to Malling but reflected wider anxiety about female monastic behaviour. Within medieval society the role of Abbess remained one of the few established forms of female authority, at St. Mary's this influence extended into the wider community, effecting sway over its tenants, markets, and clerical patronage. St Mary's held a unique position in its degree of autonomy, a status that was not common amongst other

[69] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 11.
[70] Ralph Nattrass, Vicar, *Malling Abbey 1090-1538 Volume 1* (Handwritten while convalescing at the abbey, early 20th Century), p. 123.

female houses, notably the defining of abbey as opposed to priory. Within male Benedictine houses this would denote whether the house was independent or affiliated to a mother house, here it 'conveys a distinction acquired through wealth or association with powerful lay patron.'[71] As Janet Burton says that less than 'twenty English female houses have left cartularies, those collections of copies of charters and other legal documents which enable us to build up a picture of the growth of the landed estate of a house.'[72]

The early development of West Malling Abbey clearly illustrates the complexities of post-Conquest reform within the monastic life. The Normans brought to England their religious ideals which were deeply rooted in the *Rule*, this required some adaption of female English religious and needed to be embedded into the landscape of royal and diocesan control. Gundulf's successors as bishops of Rochester frequently confirmed the abbey's privileges, but they used visitations to reaffirm authority. The relationship between bishop and abbess therefore combined mutual dependence with tension.

Patronage and political connections were vital for the survival of the abbey. Through Gundulf's original endowment to the Dissolution, St. Mary's maintained a close relationship with the monarchy and local aristocracy. Local gentry families supported the abbey through donations of land, produce, and money. In return they expected prayers for their souls and burial rights within the church. These relationships were not purely spiritual: abbesses sometimes acted as executors of wills or mediators in disputes, reflecting their influence in local politics and land management. The connection between the abbey and Neville family of Mereworth is especially well attested. His family's earlier association, including the baptismal gift of a devotional book from Elizabeth Hull, reveals the intertwining of aristocratic and monastic circles. By the early sixteenth century, royal enthusiasm for monastic patronage had waned, replaced by increasing financial scrutiny that foreshadowed the Dissolution.

Interaction with wider Church Authority

The abbess of West Malling was accountable to the Bishop of Rochester, his visitations ensured that the community maintained spiritual discipline, observed enclosure, and manged property responsibly.[73] While this supervision could limit an abbesses' independence, it also

[71] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders in Britain* p. 93.
[72] Ibid. p. 85.
[73] David Knowles, *The Religious Orders in England*, pp. 207-215.

provided protection, this reciprocal relationship reflected the Benedictine principle of obedience within an ordered hierarchy. While the nuns at Malling Abbey may have found it burdensome to subject themselves to a bishop, 'it had potential advantages. Bishops were powerful patrons who guaranteed their monasteries the support the preconquest abbeys could not find from the laity.'[74]

In 1298 Pope Boniface VIII issued a papal decree, the *Periculoso,* which required the total claustration of all Catholic nuns under pain of excommunication. The decree aimed to safeguard chastity by isolating nuns from lay contact. English bishops, including Rochester, interpreted it flexibly: nuns still managed estates, received visitors, conducted business. The decree states:

> *Wishing to provide for the dangerous and abominable situation of certain nuns, casting off the reins of respectability and impudently abandoning nunnish modesty and the natural bashfulness of their sex […] we do firmly decree […] that nuns collectively and individually, both at present and in future, of whatsoever community or order, in whatever part of the world they may be, ought henceforth to remain perpetually cloistered in their monasteries.*[75]

Their total enclosure was an attempt to prevent licentious behaviour by removing temptation 'However, empirical inquiries into the prevalence of sexually active nuns reveal that most were involved with priests already incorporated into the convent.'[76]

Not only did this decree prevent the free movement and ensure the chastity of the nuns but was an attempt to limit their numbers. The *Periculoso* was to prove virtually impossible to enforce and for three centuries was continually repeated as the decree failed as 'Nuns were still subject to visits by priests, bishops, and other men, such as visiting clerics and patrons. Female leaders were still required to go outside the monastery to complete business.'[77] A visitation to the abbey in 1299 sought to 'restrict opportunities for gossip with employees, contacts with male visitors or employees. The archbishop ordered severe penances for two

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[74] Sharon K. Elkins, *Holy Women of Twelfth Century England* (The University of North Carolina Press, North Carolina, 1988), p. 17.

[75] Michelle M. Sauer*, Representing the Negative: Positing the Lesbian Void in Medieval English Anchoritism* <http://www.lgbtran.org/HistoryAward.htm> [accessed 3rd September 2025]

[76] Periculoso https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periculoso [accessed 2nd September 2025]

[77] Periculoso https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Periculoso [accessed 2nd September 2025]

nuns found guilty of sexual immorality.'[78] Such decrees reveal the tension between the Church's desire for control and the self-governing traditions of established communities. For the nuns of west Malling, episcopal and papal authority represented both guidance and constraint, ensuring convention but limiting independence.

Bishop Winchelsey preferred to treat the requirement of enclosure at Malling Abbey as a matter already settled by the *Rule*, calling the decree 'not for fresh legislation, but only for disciplinary action against offenders.'[79] Ralph Nattrass observes that only three nuns are found to have been punished at his direction for having left the abbey, 'which suggests that the nuns of Malling had been respecting their enclosure to a degree unusual at that period.'[80]

[78] Living Stones: *The Story of Malling Abbey* (Scarbutts Printers, West Malling, 2005), p. 8.

[79] Ralph Nattrass, Vicar, *Malling Abbey 1090-1538 Volume 2* (Handwritten while convalescing at the abbey, early 20th Century), p. 119.
[80] Ibid. p. 119.

Chapter 4: The Abbey and the Town: Economic and Social Dynamics

Economic Foundations and Land Grants

The preceding chapter examined the abbesses' leadership within the cloister and their negotiation of authority under episcopal supervision. This chapter turns outward to consider how that leadership shaped the abbey's relationship with the surrounding town of West Malling. It explores the economic structures, markets, and reciprocal bonds that tied the community to its neighbours, revealing the extent to which the nuns' spiritual vocation was intertwined with practical and social responsibility.

In ancient history the most essential requirement for the primitive ancestors of West Malling was a supply of water, there is a spring which greatly influenced its development which in Christian times was called Ewell, 'ye well'. A highway ran through West Malling which is of Roman origin with traces of Roman paving, burial urns, bones of animals thought to be part of sacrificial rites. In 827 the king of the Angles, Egbert, 'gave to the Church of Christ a ville which is called Malling,'[81] which closely linked the church and West Malling from very early times. King Edmund gave the church and manor to the church of Rochester, it was Bishop Gundulf, 'who gave it to the monastery here, at his foundation of it, and this gift was confirmed by several succeeding kings, archbishops of Canterbury, bishops of Rochester, &c.'[82] Subsequent charters signed by King Edmund gifting land along with fresh supplies of water from the Ewell would make the ideal setting of an abbey. Four years after the land of Malling was gifted the Domesday Book quotes that:

> *The same bishop holds Mellingetes, it was taxed, at three sulings, and now at one and an half. The arable land is three carucates. There is a church, and one mill of two shillings, wood for the pannage of twenty hogs. In the time of king Edward the Confessor, and afterwards, it was worth forty shillings, and now four pounds*[83]

[81] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 7.
[82] Edward Hasted, Parishes: West Malling, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4* (Canterbury, 1798), British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol4/pp518-533 [accessed 6 April 2025].
[83] The Doomsday Book, 1086, held at The National Archives, Kew [accessed 18 June 2025].

Pannage quoted here refers to the act of pasturing swine in the woods or forest, allowing them to feed on acorns and nuts. This land of arable, meadow, woodland, and a mill is evidence of its productivity even before the construction of the abbey which originally consisted of a church, cloister, refectory and dormitories. During the reign of King Henry I further land was gifted to the abbey, 'a wharf at Newhythe on the bank of the river Medway, and the tithes of Borstall and Cuxton.'[84] Henry would also confirm and bequeath in 1106 the manor of Cornard in Suffolk as provision of food for the nuns, 'The King has granted to St. Mary of Malling the manor of Cornard which Robert fitz Hamon gave with his daughter for the support of the nuns.'[85] Henry later added further to the abbey, 'That he has granted to Ralph Bp. Of Rochester and Avice Abbess of Malling the right of warren in wood and field over their land at Malling; their warrens are in the King's protection even as his own.'[86] Twenty-five acres of land in Wimbush, Essex was granted to the abbey by Henry II. In 1205 King John would add the church of East Malling, and Richard de Clare, Earl of Hertford and Lord of Tonbridge provided land in Brenchley sufficient for over one hundred pigs as dowries in memory of a sister and aunt who had both been nuns at the abbey. Furthermore, Roger de Leybourne gifted over one hundred acres of woodlands, the abbey then purchased a further two hundred acres.

Property was held in Southwark, John de Cornhill gave Sarah de Plumbergh, 'and the nuns there all his rights in a messuage and two mills plus 6s. 8d. rent in Southwark.'[87] The overall picture is of an estate that was relatively compact with the main manors and lands lying close to the abbey. Medway Wharf was a practical addition while the manor of Cornard, and Southwark and Essex properties, brought in much needed revenue, there were few additional gifts of land and manors after this period but what was held by St. Marys remained constant until the house was dissolved. The town continued to grow under the nuns' administration. The Market Cross, which stood by the entrance to West Street until the 18th century, marked the southern end of the Green which extended to the top of Town Hill.

In 1292, the reign of Edward I, further pleadings were made in the Quo Warento that while initially the foundation of the convent was on plain virtually uninhabited fields, it had become 'exceedingly populace from the numbers who flocked to it from all parts, who

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[84] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* p. 8.
[85] *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannom 1066-1154 Vol. 2* Ed. Charles Johnson and H. A. Cronne (The Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1956), Calendar 791.
[86] Ibid. Calendar 943.
[87] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* p. 9.

building themselves houses here, formed a large village, well suited for trade, to the no small emolument of the nuns,'[88] and furthermore that 'it soon lost its name of Malling Parva, which was for some time transferred to the neighbouring parish of East Malling, as appears by some grants, &c, of this time and King Edward III.'[89] By the fourteenth century, taxation records reveal the abbey as among the wealthier female houses in the diocese, distinguishing it from smaller nunneries dependant on lay patrons.

The following century saw much of the Green permanently settled by traders and became known as 'Middle Row', that is, the thin strip of land between King Street and High Street. For many hundreds of years, the town was the site of a thriving market which continued even after the dissolution of the abbey by Henry VIII.

Markets, Industry, and Urban Growth

The abbey's influence extended beyond its precinct walls, shaping the development of West Malling as a thriving medieval market town. From its earliest years, the nuns' control of mills, farmland and trade created an economic partnership between the abbey and town that would endure.

Following the abbey's construction the population grew. King Henry I authorised the creation of 'a large village suitable for merchants and profitable to the nuns.'[90] The broad High Street was likely laid out to host a market from the early twelfth century, when King Henry l granted the first license for a Wednesday and Saturday market in 1102, 'That for the love of God and the Virgin, he grants to the nuns of Malling a market in Malling. This he granted at the prayer of Queen Matilda.'[91] In 1277-78 the Placita de Quo Waranto, a warrant of authority, was renewed by the superior of Malling which established her rights that along with the freedoms and permits of West and East Malling she had the right, 'holding of a market in every week on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and of three fairs in the year, on the eve and day of St. Peter ad Vincula, on the eve and day of St. Martin, and on the eve and day of St. Leonard.'[92] These charters gave the community both economic security and social standing, while imposing obligation to manage the land efficiently, pay tithes, and practice charity towards its dependants. Ralph Nattrass wrote, 'The Malling fair dates are suggestive

[88] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum:* p. 381.
[89] Ibid, p. 381.
[90] Nuns of West Malling Abbey, *Life of Gundulf* p. 57-58.
[91] *Regesta Regum Anglo-Normannom 1066-1154 Vol. 2* Calendar 634.

[92] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum:* p. 381.

of harvest time, fruit gathering, and the time for cutting and selling wood for the winter.'[93] While the frequent markets supplied daily needs, the fairs were held at seasons when there were supplies to be had for storing.

By the thirteenth century, the abbey estate included rents from tenements and mills, while accounts reveal income from corn, honey, livestock, and the leasing of meadowland. Malling's markets had become an essential feature of local trade. Rents from market stalls and tenements formed a steady income for the abbey, and tolls from passing merchants were collected at the town gates. Surviving records from the Rochester diocese indicate that disputes occasionally arose between the abbey and neighbouring manors over market rights, an indicator of its commercial success. During market day a court was held. It had a dual function not just for litigation but as 'the source of the jurisdiction which the steward exercised, as controller of weights and measures, and as justice to punish offenders,'[94] but also 'as president of this court he was able to collect, through the bailiff, the tolls charged on goods, and the dues for setting up of stalls.'[95] The court was a combined court of justice and an excise office.

The expansion of the town was closely tied to the abbey's prosperity. New streets and burgage plots developed along the route between Maidstone and Wrotham, providing housing for craftsmen and traders, economic strength stemmed from the religious foundations. Cronk writes, 'the manor of West Malling (that is to say the freehold ownership of the whole place and all the rights and dues which went with it) had long been in the possession of the bishopric and with this the good prelate endowed his newly built abbey.' [96] Furthermore, that 'The destinies of West Malling and its abbey through the ages have been constantly interwoven. For seven centuries the latter was the seat of the manor, and the fount of authority.'[97] The abbess and nuns had 'jurisdiction over all the town, and advowson of the church of St. Mary and St. Leonard's chapel.'[98] Unlike other cloistered sites of the time, monastic rule would become a great benefit to the inhabitants of the abbey and town as they were removed from the quarrelling of the feudal barons in the neighbouring villages. At

[93] Ralph Nattrass, Vicar, *Malling Abbey 1090-1538 Volume 1* p. 90.
[94] Ibid. p. 91.
[95] Ibid. p. 91.
[96] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 10.
[97] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 10.
[98] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 10.

harvest-time tithes were paid to the abbey being carried to the tithe barn which still exists today as a chapel for retreat.

The Rev. Fielding wrote in 1893 of the surrounding Malling parishes that 'though these parishes have never been very populous, they have maintained their own throughout every period of English history, owing to the bountiful supply of water and the fertility of the district.'[99] The lands around West Malling are very fertile, its situation and climate made it ideally suited for not only growing the more usual crops but also orchards of apples and pears. The lands around the abbey were very likely split into granges which would have been either farmed by lay brothers and tenants or leased to local families. Those manorial documents and account rolls that still exist from similar houses show wide ranging portfolios which include amongst them grain production, wool, dairy, orchards and fishponds. While the markets enabled the abbey to have an income, they also shaped the growth and development of West Malling. Under the protection of the abbey the town became a substantial centre for trade as merchants, craftsmen, and farmers gathered there. The fairs attracted people from the surrounding parishes while the stall fees, food, lodging and tolls generated financial income for abbey and townsfolk alike.

In the Medieval period the town owed its importance to the tanning industry, situated in the meadows at the bottom of what was once called Tan Street, the inevitable stench associated with this industry would have been blown away from the town while the river carried away its waste. Over many centuries and countless generations, the town has been home to master craftsmen including blacksmiths, saddlers, wheelwrights, carpenters and candle and soap makers, all serving the townsfolk and visitors. Archaeological evidence from the town reveals industrial activity linked to the abbey estates. Excavations near Swan Street and King Hill have uncovered traces of medieval ironworking, pottery kilns, and tanneries. The Ewell stream provided water for these trades as well as for brewing and domestic use. Though enclosed, the nuns oversaw agricultural lands, tenant farmers, and pasture rights in nearby royal forests. Income from rents and town plots provided a steady revenue, ensuring economic self-sufficiency

[99] Rev. C. H. Fielding, *Memories of Malling and its Valley* p. 2.

Mutual Benefit and Social Networks

Although the nuns lived a life of seclusion and prayer, their house remained closely linked to the secular world. The abbey's prosperity and the town's growth were mutually reinforcing, the most prominent proof of this advantageous relationship is shown in the mutual beneficial success of the abbey and the growth of the town of West Malling, built around the street market in High Street which is to the west of the abbey precinct. The addition of gifts and endowments from its royal and ecclesiastical benefactors greatly increased economic security and independence, enabling the abbey to flourish and establish a new town to thrive around the convent.[100] These benefits contributed greatly to the importance of St Mary's Abbey as a spiritual and commercial centre in the area.

For the families of low rank in society there was no need to send their unmarried daughters to the convent, it would not have benefitted them, 'for, working in the fields among his sons, or spinning and brewing with his wife at home, she could earn a supplementary if not a living wage.'[101] Similarly, for tradesmen of the town the daughters could be apprenticed to a trade, as too was domestic service seen as an acceptable occupation if marriage was not forthcoming. In contrast to the low-born, a female born to the gentry had options limited options, marriage or the convent with a small dowery. It is known that the nuns of Malling Abbey were from noble families whose family left legacies to the abbey. A certain level of education was essential and despite the *Rule* which forbade the child bringing anything to the convent, it was accepted that the family of a novice would provide a dower. Power writes, 'Throughout the middle ages a struggle went on between the Church, which forbade the exaction of doweries, and the convents which persisted in demanding them, sometimes in so flagrant a manner as to incur the charge of simony.'[102] For a novice nun entering the convent through her parents, the life within could be a prison or a religious vocation, they might take the veil 'because it offered an honourable career for superfluous girls, who were unwilling to marry; or they might take it in a real spirit of devotion, with a real call to the religious life.'[103] The convent would also offer sanctuary to older women, often widows, keen to end their lives in the peaceful surroundings of the abbey. Many of these elder widows went on to

[100] Janet Burton, *Monastic and Religious Orders*, pp.85-90.
[101] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women Religious 800-1500* p. 14.
[102] Ibid. p. 24.
[103] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women Religious 800-1500* p. 27.

become the head of the house and were not necessarily shy of asking for help in attaining this position.

According to Roberta Gilchrist, 'Medieval nunneries were liminal places – located at the physical and psychological margins of society,'[104] while this is true of Malling Abbey the link between town and abbey was close, while it was the major landowner and employer of the area. The influence of the abbey over the town reached its peak in the thirteenth century with the abbess as the leading authority, lawgiver and enforcer. Many people living within the town were her tenants, pledging their loyalty to her for their lands, paid their fines to her courts, paid rent and heriots or death duties. In 1314 the head of Malling Abbey claimed the right to have a pillory, stocks, and gaol with the right to discipline thieves caught on her land, arguing her case against the Crown having been given control in a charter issued by King John.

Nevertheless, the commercial advantage of living and working outside the abbeys walls for the townsfolk was the social role it played in the community. It may have given small amounts of alms, offered hospitality to travelling pilgrims, and services of worship to the population surrounding the abbey. Apart from the main abbey buildings is the guest house incorporating much of the fifteenth century hospice for pilgrims who sought shelter while on their way to Canterbury. Traditionally there was only access to the upper floor via a ladder, this room was for the women, once they had retired the ladder was removed allowing the men to sleep below with the horses. Although nuns were not ordained as priests, visiting chaplains could offer prayer services and burial rights.

Nevertheless, the abbey's strong financial growth would be badly affected by social disaster in the 14th century with the Black Death, impacting on the labour force, the death of its tenant farmers, reduced rents, and likely famine for those living in the abbey as food was scarce. The devastation of fires too caused much damage to buildings in the grounds forcing reconstruction at a time when finances were stretched. Many townspeople left money and gifts to the abbey, the prioress and nuns in their wills, some requested burial in the abbey churchyard, others requested prayers be said for their souls.

The town was no stranger to troubles with the crown, in the rebellions of the 1470's with Edward IV, the townsfolk found themselves opposing the king. In the *Calendar of Rolls* there

[104] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture* p. 66.

is a letter of general pardon for William Pellican, 'gentliman,' *late one of the inhabitants of the township of Westmallyng, co. Kent.* Along with many others in this turbulent period in Kent and Surrey, he had received his pardon as he had *made fine and ransom to the king, of all offences committed by them before 7 July last*. There was much poverty among the female monastic houses, especially in the 15th and 16th centuries, Malling was not exempt from this, many of the local people remembered the nuns in their wills, some made the leaders of the house their executor. They made requests for prayers, for burial in the abbeys lay cemetery, and made gifts to the abbey church. The vicar of Leybourne left £8 for a silver and gilt censor, while the head of the house and nuns were left small amounts of money or gifts, such as a silver spoon and 6s. 8d. left to abbess Katherine Weston in 1452.

The will of Margery Sondes who died in 1522 reveals her concerns for the nuns, at least two of which were her sisters. Her will reveals her concern for her sisters and friends suggesting that they needed bedding. Margery wished to be buried in the abbey churchyard and bequeathed money, her wedding ring, gifts of beds and bedding, brass, tablecloths, curtains, monies annually to every female in the abbey, the profits from the sale of her lands in Malling were to be spent on twenty years of obit and five pounds of wax taper for burning on the rood, along with money paid to the priests for masses. Margery showed great compassion and charity to the nuns of St. Mary's, she recognized their need and poverty. However, despite the difficult periods, the abbey continued largely due to the mutual economic link between the convent and the town of West Malling, creating a lasting bond which ensured the survival of St. Mary's for centuries. For 450 years the abbey and town of Malling endured in reasonable prosperity and peace, seemingly escaping the civil wars and rebellions that were prolific across the land in this period.

Chapter 5: Crisis and Change – Fire, Plague, and Reformation

The Fire of 1190 – Destruction and Reconstruction

Building on the economic role outlined above the abbey interspersed its commercial development and steadiness with extreme times of disruption. The most significant of these were the devastation of the fire in 1190 which destroyed much of the abbey and town, the worldwide death rate and economic disaster caused by the Black Death in 1349 and the final catastrophic political and religious turmoil caused by Henry VIII's English Reformation, which resulted in the surrendering of the abbey on 28th October 1538. Each of these trials tested the strength of the abbesses and the buildings themselves, as they were forced to experience the vulnerability of monastic life when faced with such crisis.

A devastating fire swept through both West Malling Abbey and the surrounding town. Contemporary chroniclers recorded that "almost all was consumed by flame." The disaster destroyed the church and domestic buildings, along with records and precious relics. It is cited in Dugdale's Monasticon: 'In 1190, both the town and nunnery of Malling were consumed by fire.'[105] It left the nuns destitute until royal and episcopal aid arrived. Originally built of wood, the abbey was always in danger from the destructive effects of fire as they used open hearths, kitchens, and candles. Power writes that the frequency of fires in the Middle Ages 'was probably often to blame for the ruin of buildings. There were no contrivances for extinguishing flames, and the thatched and wooden houses must have burned like stubble.'[106] Not only did they lose buildings but irreplaceable manuscripts, altar furnishings, and abbey records, badly affecting the daily lives of those living within the convent. Sally Thompson writes that one of the major reasons for the absence of early documents was that the 'Fire seems to have been a major hazard. References to fires occur at a sizable number of houses and sometimes, it is explicitly stated that documents were burned.'[107]

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[105] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum:* p. 381.
[106] Eileen Power, *Medieval Women Religious 800-1500* p. 127.
[107] Sally Thompson, *Women Religious, The Founding of English Nunneries after the Norman Conquest* (Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1991), p. 11.

While stone buildings would eventually be built, it took many years to complete. Richard I issued confirmation of the abbey's privileges and ordered that timber be provided from the royal forests. Local lords and benefactors also contributed funds and labour. The new abbey church, rebuilt in stone, reflected the transmission from Norman to Early English architecture. The disaster forced the community to reconsider its resources and priorities. Rebuilding required careful financial management while the nuns' ability to restore their church demonstrates their resilience and organisation. Although little of the rebuilt structure survives, the south wall and transept show Early English features, including pointed arches and narrow lancet windows. These stylistic changes symbolised both physical and spiritual renewal after the fire.

The Black Death – Loss and Recovery

The mid-fourteenth century brought renewed crisis as the plague reached Kent in 1349. Like most monastic houses, West Malling suffered catastrophic losses. The Black Death was to have an enormous impact on the abbey and town as it took a terrible toll on the population. Surviving records suggest that the community of around twenty nuns and novices was reduced to only eight. Platt writes, 'Particularly exposed, as always, to economic disaster were the ill-endowed communities of nuns.'[108] On 5th May1349 it left the abbey without a leader as the prioress had died, Bishop Hamo de Hethe instructed the precentress and subprioress to have an election as a matter of urgency, in his absence, being himself sick with the plague.

Bishop Hamo instructed John de Sheppey the prior of Rochester to act for him. The nuns were summoned and Sheppey preached a sermon to those nuns in attendance, ten were unavailable as they were seriously ill in the infirmary. A clerk had the unenviable task of gathering the votes from the sick nuns, a risk to his health but necessary to ensure the validity of the election. Benedicta de Grey was elected but had to be carried to the altar as she was very ill and died the following night. A new election date was proposed with even fewer professed nuns eligible to vote including the newly elected abbess, dying a few days after her election. In rapid succession the abbey had lost three leaders of the house, 'it seemed that the Abbey would never survive this devastating blow which had followed decades of maladministration.'[109] Due to the death rate within the abbey and the bishop's illness another

[108] Colin Platt, *The Abbeys and Priories of Medieval England,* p. 133.
[109] Living Stones: *The Story of Malling Abbey,* p. 10.

election was postponed for a few months, Margery de Pateshelle was elected and the bishop instructed that she and the remaining nuns slept, ate, and worshipped together while the plague raged on, to prevent further deaths. It is said that the bishop despaired for St. Mary's and Cronk writes, 'After this setback, it must have taken years for Malling and its abbey to regain its prosperity.'[110] In the wake of the epidemic, Bishop Hamo conducted visitations to assess the damage. He found the buildings in need of repair and the community weakened.

The election of a new abbess during this period illustrates both vulnerability and persistence. When Abbess Lora de Retlyng died in 1350, the few remaining nuns gathered in Chapter to elect her successor. Their choice, Cecily de Cranebroke, faced the immediate challenge of restoring order and income. Cecily's administration focused on rebuilding the abbey's finances. Manorial records show renewed leasing of demesne land to tenants and the careful collection of arrears. Despite this disaster the community continued and in 1400 they were able to build the guest house, make adaptions to the west front of the church, then in the 15th century re-built the gatehouses in Swan Street and Water Lane. The nuns repaired the southern range of the cloisters re-using part of the 13th century cloister built after the fire of 1190 by Abbess Regina.

The recovery was slow but steady. By 1365, taxation returns indicate modest growth, and later episcopal letters describe the abbey as "in good repute." Of the inhabitants of the whole town and the Abbey only 15 remained alive. This made the impact of the Black Death in the 14th century catastrophic and extensive for St. Mary's and the town. The Black Death transformed both religious and social life, shaking faith yet also prompting renewed piety. For the nuns of West Malling, survival reinforced their spiritual purpose. Their endurance, like the rebuilt church after the fire, symbolised continuity after disaster.

The Dissolution – Political and Spiritual End

By the early sixteenth century, West Malling Abbey stood among the wealthier female houses in England. Yet this prosperity made it a target for Henry VIII's campaign to dissolve the monasteries. According to Glyn Coppack, in 1536, 'there were still more than 800 abbeys and priories in England, who between them enjoyed a cash income from their collected estates valued by the Commissioners of the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* at more than £160,000.'[111] With a changing more secular society the alleged good living off wealthy estates and monastic

[110] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent,* p. 12.
[111] Glyn Coppack, *English Heritage: Abbeys and Priories,* p. 129.

seclusion was creating a rift between the people and the religious. Despite fire and plague, the final and most significant challenge for St. Mary's came when it was confronted by the Reformation.

Henry VIII instigated the Dissolution of the Monasteries between 1536-1541 as a political and financial move designed to reduce the power of the Pope and seize the funds and assets of the Church.[112] Henry had attempted reform by suppressing all religious houses which had an income of less than £200 annually, but this resulted in a rebellion, the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536, with its eventual collapse the traitors were executed and estates confiscated by the crown. As a result of the challenge, 'the government's approach to the monasteries rapidly changed, and what had begun as a genuine attempt at reform now became a systematic attempt to rid the country of all monks and nuns.'[113]

Elizabeth Rede was the penultimate head of St. Mary's who was present when the kings' commissioners completed the audit at Malling Abbey for the *Valor Ecclesiasticus* in 1535. Thomas Cromwell's *Valor* assessed the abbey's lands and revenues. Commissioners recorded plate, vestments, and furnishings of considerable value. Their detailed inventories reveal the material culture of late medieval monasticism: silver chalices, embroidered altar cloths, and relics of saints, all soon to be confiscated. According to Dugdale the document contains the handwriting of Archbishop Cranmer who would ultimately purchase the possessions of the monastery from Henry VIII. The document contains all the properties and lands owned by the abbey in West Malling, East Malling, Thurne Manor in Norfolk, the churches and lands in Woldham, Petham, Trosclyff, Luddisdon, and Cuccleston, along with property and land in Southwark, Suffolk and Essex, totalling £245.10 shillings. 2½ pence.[114] Elizabeth Rede understood the threat of the King's Commissioners and was prepared to be obstructive in preventing a peaceful surrender of the abbey. Her resistance, though futile, became emblematic of loyalty to the Benedictine ideal of stability and faithfulness, nonetheless, she would be later forced to resign.

The last abbess of St. Mary's Abbey, Margaret Vernon, had been tutor to Cromwell's son, and had already surrendered Little Marlow Priory. When Margaret Vernon realised the

[112] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture,* pp. 41-50
[113] Ibid. p. 131.
[114] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum,* p. 387.

inevitability of the impending dissolution, she wrote to Cromwell asking him to allow her to keep the abbey, even if it was dissolved, to let her live out the rest of her life there. Realizing it was just a matter of time before she and the nuns would have to leave she made a last request of Thomas Cromwell: sell Cornard manor in Suffolk to provide for the eleven nuns in her charge instead of pensions, to pay off her servants and purchase for herself a living with friends that would home her, this request was declined. In October 1538, 'As she had surrendered Little Marlowe into the king's hands so she surrendered Malling.'[115] Hasted writes, 'This abbey was surrendered into the king's hands, with all its possessions, among which were the manors of East and West Malling, with the precincts of Ewell and Parrock.'[116]

On 28 October 1538, Crown officials seized the abbey seal and property. Not one of the nuns signed the Deed of Dissolution.

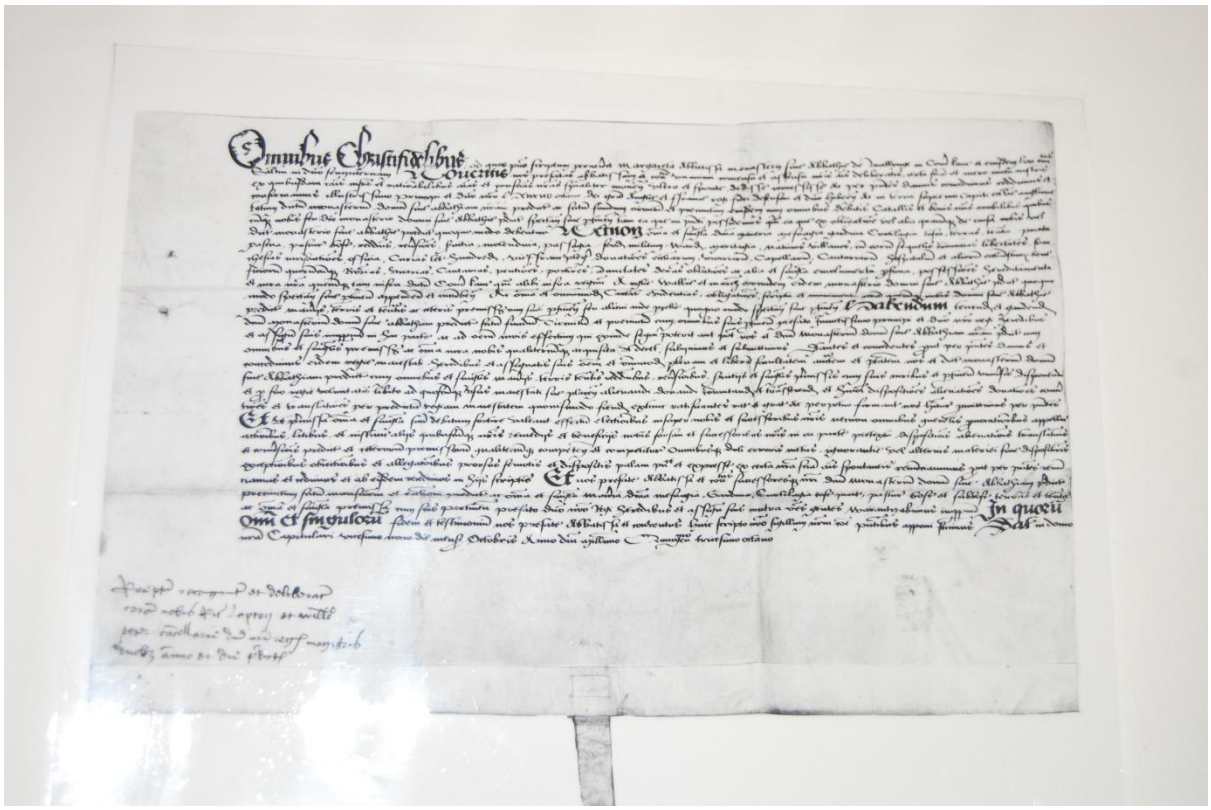

Figure 5: Unsigned Deed of Surrender.

The Dissolution ended nearly 450 years of continuous monastic life. Yet contemporary reports note the abbey's orderliness and piety even at its closure, distinguishing it from less

[115] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990,* p. 65.
[116] Edward Hasted, Parishes: West Malling, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4* (Canterbury, 1798), British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol4/pp518-533 [accessed 6 April 2025].

disciplined houses. Along with the abbey the king received the parsonage, prebend, and the advowson of the vicarage, 'after which the king, next year, granted this parsonage, with the manor of West Malling, and other premises, to Thomas Cranmer, to hold by knight's service, at the yearly rent.'[117] The surrender document states that the 'abbey and its lands and other properties was received, acknowledged and delivered to Richard Layton and William Peter, two Masters in Chancery, on 29 October 1538.'[118] The abbey was 'finally surrendered into the king's hands, together with its possessions, by the abbess and the convent,'[119] In the same year the king assigned pensions to the women of St. Mary's:

Margaret Vernon, abbess, per annum - £40

Felix Cocks, Arminal Bere, Margaret Giles, Joane Randall, Betrice Williams, Rosa Morton nuns, per annum - £3. 6s and 8d

Letitia Duke, Juliana Whetnall, Joane Hull, Elizabeth Pympe, Agnes West, nuns, per annum - £2. 13s and 4d

While Margaret Vernon had only occupied the house for two years some of the nuns had lived there for at least sixteen years, possibly longer. What happened to them is unknown but it was an end of their aspirations and security. Of the eleven nuns, Joane Randall, Letitia Duke, Juliana Whetnall, Joane Hull and Agnes West were still drawing a pension in 1553 which would indicate that that the systems in place continued for some while after the Dissolution allowing them to be traceable. Some nuns may have returned to their families, worked as governesses or servants, some would have died in wretched poverty, something they would not have experienced before. Wedlock would not have been a possibility until 1547 when there was a retraction of the Act of Six Articles releasing ex-religious from their vow of celibacy.

For the women of Malling, the Dissolution was both an institutional and spiritual bereavement. Their dispersal marked the loss of a self-contained female community that had survived fire and plague but could not withstand royal policy. Thomas Cromwell destroyed what had taken hundreds of years to establish, churches were taken apart, 'their cloisters turned into private houses or simply used as quarries, the contents dispersed or ruthlessly

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[117] Edward Hasted, Parishes: West Malling, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4* (Canterbury, 1798), British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol4/pp518-533 [accessed 6 April 2025].
[118] Ibid, p. 65.
[119] William Dugdale, *Monasticon Anglicanum:* p. 381.

destroyed, and their lands sold off or added to the royal estates.'[120] The king was now the owner of the abbey manor and rights in West Malling but he exchanged them in 1541. Thomas Cranmer would receive 'the scite of the abbey, precinct and circuit of it, and the manors of West Malling, Ewell, and Parocke, and the parsonage of West Malling.'[121]

Aftermath and Continuity

On 20 November 1551, Thomas Cranmer granted a ninety-nine-year lease of the abbey site and lands in East and West Malling to his brother-in-law, Hugh Cartwright. Shortly after his arrival he marched from Malling to aid the repelling of Wyatt's rebellion against Queen Mary, on his return he settled down to farm the abbey lands, possessing the same rights as the abbesses had done. Following the dissolution, most of the church and buildings were dismantled, leaving only the West tower, the south wall of the nave, parts of the crossing tower and south transept, and parts of the cloister arcades.[122] It was most likely Cartwright who removed the roof from the church and adapted the monastic buildings into a domestic home for himself and his family, upon his death and that of his wife, the abbey once more returned to the hands of the Crown, namely Queen Elizabeth.

The Dissolution brought profound change to West Malling, yet the abbey's physical and spiritual presence endured, the abbey did not completely fade physically or emotionally. The estate's transfer to Sir Henry Wyatt and his descendants transformed the site into a secular manor, but its monastic identity was never entirely erased. Several of the abbey's medieval buildings were adapted for domestic use, with later Tudor and Georgian additions, while sections of the church were left in picturesque ruin. The Gundulf tower remained a landmark, its Norman masonry a visible link to the abbey's origins.

The land was later owned by the Cobhams and the Rayneys before Frazer Honeywood took over. In his time several of the conventual buildings have survived in some way as they have been reused. Oakley writes that Frazer Honeywood, a London banker, who lived at the abbey from 1740-1764, 'rebuilt the house and that many of the ancient buildings were then still standing and were made use of.'[123] Honeywood appears to have found the nuns burial ground on the south side, 'as in digging there, great quantities of human bones have been thrown up,

[120] Glyn Coppack, *English Heritage: Abbeys and Priories,* p. 13.
[121] Edward Hasted, Parishes: West Malling, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4* (Canterbury, 1798), British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol4/pp518-533 [accessed 6 April 2025].
[122] Roberta Gilchrist, *Gender and Material Culture,* pp. 120-123.
[123] Anne M. Oakley, *Malling Abbey 1090-1990* p. 60.

and two stone coffins with skeletons in them,'[124] and though the lids were unscripted they did have a cross on them 'having a quatrefoil pierced at the upper end, the stem of which was crossed more than once with foliage,'[125] probably indicating an abbess burial. Honeywood also uncovered some old coins, rings and trinkets at varying times while clearing away rubbish at the site.

Aretas Akers Douglas, the Conservative Chief Whip, unwillingly inherited the site, he would have preferred money so sold the property in the 1890's to the philanthropic Charlotte Boyd who founded the English Abbey Restoration Trust. The aim of the trust was to provide funds for the purchase of ancient ecclesiastical buildings with the aim to restore them as places of worship. Cronk muses that, 'so after an interim of three and a half centuries as a secular habitation, the ancient abbey of the Blessed Virgin Mary became once more a religious house.'[126]

After several attempts to encourage the nuns return to Malling it wasn't until 1916 that a new chapter began when an Anglican Benedictine community of nuns was invited to reoccupy the site. Their arrival restored monastic life to West Malling after nearly four centuries. They rebuilt new accommodation alongside the medieval ruins and reintroduced the rhythm of prayer, study and hospitality. The nuns continued to use the converted old south transept as their chapel until 1962 when a new church was built over the crossing of the old. A mix of older ruins and later building work allow the site to show its long thousand-year life in its structures and continuing spiritual aura with the reinstatement of a Benedictine community in the twentieth century, a remarkable example of survival. Many nuns have lived on the site of St. Mary's abbey and their inheritors continue to live enclosed from the world, upholding the daily round of prayer, study and manual work within their home, garden, orchards and craft rooms; 'out of the world yet very much part of it, as their predecessors had been in the time of their founder, Bishop Gundulf.'[127]

The 53rd *Rule of St. Benedict* says, 'All guests who arrive should be received as if they were Christ, for he will say, "I was a stranger and you took me in".'[128] Every year hundreds of

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[124] Edward Hasted, Parishes: West Malling, in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 4* (Canterbury, 1798), British History Online https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol4/pp518-533 [accessed 6 April 2025].
[125] Ibid.
[126] Anthony Cronk, *A Short History of West Malling Kent* p. 16.
[127] Ibid, p. 74.
[128] *The Rule of St. Benedict*, Translated by Carolinne White p. 78.

guests come to the Abbey to be spiritually and physically enriched by the nuns. The loss of the abbey in West Malling with its long tradition, strong established links with the local community and substantial imposing presence would have been a huge sadness to the area both materially and symbolically.

Today little remains of the original building, the tower is Norman at the first two storeys and then Early English, attached to the tower are what remain of the church, one of the transepts and a wall of the nave. The refectory still exists as do the cloisters, 'Rebuilt with buttressing to carry an upper floor in the 15th century, it has trefoiled arches on close-set pairs of quatrefoil section shafts with capitals with trilobed interlacing leaves.'[129] The modern cloister was rebuilt in 1963, the pond is gravity-fed by the local Ewell stream, symbolic of the living water of Christ.

Figure 5. The Modern Cloister, Malling Abbey.

With its remnants of architecture and culture in the town it is a lasting important reflection of the religious and social history of Kent.

[129] Mike Salter, Medieval Nunneries (Folly Publications, Malvern, 2015), p. 71.

Conclusion

St. Mary's Abbey in West Malling offers a captivating case study of female monastic life in Medieval England. Founded in the wake of the Norman Conquest by Bishop Gundulf of Rochester, it was one of the first Benedictine houses for women established under the influence of the Normans, combining the spiritual principles of the *Rule of St. Benedict* and the diplomatic objectives of church reform. For almost five centuries the abbey grew into a self-sufficient religious and economic centre, greatly entrenched in the life of the town that grew around its borders.

With the archaeological examination of its groundworks, the history of its founding by the bishop, its internal authority, and daily survival, we can expand our understanding of the ways in which religious women influenced and maintained enclosed life. The growing interest in monastic sites throughout the nineteenth century has enabled many to survive whether above or below ground. Archaeologists continue to survey and study the sites which in turn 'will continue the growth of our knowledge and interpretation of our monastic past.'[130]

The Abbesses of Malling Abbey were far more than just figureheads, they were administrators, landowners, and religious guides. The abbey's economic strength, status, and fortitude in times of disaster were directly affected by the decisions and fortitude of its leader. In the relationship between abbey and the town of West Malling there is firm confirmation that the convent far from being an isolated enclave was actively part of the area's economy and social systems. The devastating impact and challenges caused by fire, plague, and the Reformation clearly reveal not only the vulnerability of the abbey but also its ability to adapt.

While the community eventually yielded to the widespread dissolution policies of the 16th century, the long history of St. Mary's reveals the ingenuity and lasting significance of pious women in the religious and social growth of England. The constancy of sacred life on the site, which has been restored in the modern era by an Anglican Benedictine community, adds poignancy to its history, while foundations may be dissolved and destroyed the legacy of collective worship and observance perseveres. 'For the Benedictine life, as the Christian life

[130] Glyn Coppack, *English Heritage: Abbeys and Priories* p. 146.

it expresses, has an astonishing vitality and resilience, bearing within it the grace of renewal and new life.'[131]

Coppack writes 'Though considerable progress has been made, our knowledge of monastic life in medieval England remains imperfect and there are many avenues of research that remain to be followed up.'[132] This is true for St. Mary's Abbey, while a great deal is known and studied there is still more to be found, there may well be further archaeological investigation in the future as the site battles to keep its privacy and seclusion against the changing world of the 21st century and its never-ending need for land. Documents, writs, wills, may come to light giving us an added perspective on the lives of those within the cloister.

In this dissertation the aim has been to merge all information on the life and experiences of the nuns of West Malling by drawing on a range of resources to build an intricate and linked portrayal of their lives. It has also attempted to fill a gap in current study by focusing on a comparatively overlooked medieval monastic house, research in the future may further expand on the existing surviving material, the culture of the inhabitants, discover personal divine scripts, if any are uncovered, or study the comparative similarities and differences with other contemporary convents in the south of England.

There is a bronze sculpture in West Malling called Hope depicting the rich tapestry of the life and history of the town and its inhabitants.

[131] Living Stones: *The Story of Malling Abbey* p. 11.

[132]Glyn Coppack, *English Heritage: Abbeys and Priories* p. 146.

Figure 6. *Hope with Dove* sculpture, West Malling.

Figure 7. *Hope's Cloak* sculpture, West Malling.

Today the town is a thriving community and Hope acts as a focal point where people meet to chat as depicted in the first panel, below that are the aeroplanes of the Mosquito squadrons which were based at West Malling airfield, then she depicts the rich agriculture tradition of West Malling with its hops and orchards. In 1704 the first ever cricket game was recorded to have been played in the town, the fifth panel refers to the abbeys charter allowing the markets which continue today despite the Dissolution. Hope reveals the crushed rebellion of Wyatt against Mary Tudor by the troops that were stationed at West Malling and his subsequent execution, panel seven shows scenes of the Black Plague when West Malling was the site of mass graves for the dead of North West Kent, and finally at the bottom are the nuns, founded by the bishop of Rochester as a centre of prayer for five centuries and then re-established in the twentieth century. Hope represents a running woman caught in a moment in time, representing the constant forward movement of the town and its rich past billowing on her cloak, in her hand is a dove yet to take flight depicting the future to come and the hopes and prayers of everyone.

In conclusion, the history of West Malling Abbey and town deepens our knowledge of medieval life and religious women, not as docile occupants of the cloister, but as energetic representatives of faith, business, and society across the centuries. I have only lived in West Malling for seven years and the incredible history of this one town has astounded and humbled me, it has been a privilege to write about it, visit and converse with the nuns, walk

around the town, monthly visits to the local farmers market and look at Hope. The bell still rings daily at the abbey calling the nuns to prayer which can be heard across the town, although behind high walls that enclose them, they are still the strong presence that they ever were, praying for the souls of everyone in this troubled world.

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